Health Subcommittee Examines Stem Cell Research Efforts

Washington, D.C. -Today the Subcommittee on Health held a hearing entitled, “Stem Cell Science: The Foundation for Future Cures,” to examine the current status of domestic and international stem cell research efforts. During the hearing, witnesses, including Elias A. Zerhouni, Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), discussed the potential of stem cells treatments and the importance of additional research.

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NIH
Director and Leading Scientists Discuss Potential of Embryonic Stem Cells, Urge Lifting of Restrictions on Research and Funding

Washington, D.C. -Today the Subcommittee on Health held a hearing entitled, “Stem Cell Science: The Foundation for Future Cures,” to examine the current status of domestic and international stem cell research efforts. During the hearing, witnesses, including Elias A. Zerhouni, Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), discussed the potential of stem cells treatments and the importance of additional research.

Stem cell research provides the opportunity to study the growth and differentiation of individual cells into tissues and has the potential to improve the lives of millions of people in the United States and around the world. Understanding stem cell processes could provide insights into the causes of birth defects, genetic abnormalities, and other disease states. Additionally, stem cells could be used to test new drugs, to treat disease and injury, or repair damaging side effects of medical treatments such as chemotherapy.

“Stem cell research holds great promise for better understanding and treatment of a broad range of debilitating and deadly diseases and conditions,” said Rep. John D. Dingell (D-MI), Chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce. “None of us can guarantee to those suffering from Parkinson’s disease, spinal cord injuries, or multiple sclerosis that embryonic stem cell research will bring success. But we can guarantee that if we let politics, not science, guide our efforts, we consign ourselves to failure.”

Scientists primarily work with two kinds of stem cells – adult stem cells (ASCs) and embryonic stem cells (ESCs) – which have different functions and characteristics. Current science indicates that, although both of these cell types hold enormous promise, adult and embryonic stem cells differ in important ways.

"Few areas of scientific inquiry hold the same level of promise to revolutionize the practice of medicine as stem cells," said Rep. Frank Pallone Jr. (D-NJ), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Health. "Unfortunately, the Bush administration's current policy on embryonic stem cell research has tied the hands of researchers. Congress cannot give up trying to enact a federal policy that will help advance all types of stem cell research and provide the opportunity for medical discoveries to occur."

On August 9, 2001, President Bush issued an executive order that Federal funds would be used only to support research on human embryonic stem cells that existed before August 9, 2001. Many scientists and disease advocates have expressed concerns that most of these older stem cells are no longer viable and that American researchers and science could lose its preeminence in a key field of 21st-century research.

Responding to these concerns, Congress passed H.R. 3, the “Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2007”, on January 5, 2007. This legislation, which was introduced by Reps. Diana DeGette (D–CO) and Mike Castle (R–DE), would have directed the Secretary of HHS to conduct and support research that utilizes human embryonic stem cells, regardless of the date derived. The bill also instructed NIH to establish and enforce ethical guidelines before conducting research on stem cells. This legislation passed the House by a vote of 253 to 174 on January 11, 2007. A companion bill, S. 5, which was introduced on January 4, 2007, passed the Senate by a vote of 63 to 34. On June 7, 2007, the House passed S. 5 by a vote of 247 to 176. On June 20, 2007, President Bush vetoed this legislation.

“Over the last few years, we
have seen breakthroughs that couldn’t have been predicted ranging from
insulin producing islet cells created from embryonic stem cells to
primate embryonic stem cells generated through somatic cell nuclear
transfer (SCNT),” said Rep. DeGette, chief architect of the Stem Cell
Research Enhancement Act. “In light of all the research coming down the
pipeline, I am developing new legislation with U.S. Rep. Michael Castle
that will lift the ban on federal funding of embryonic stem cell
research, direct the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to construct a
framework for ethical oversight of all cell-based research, and ban
certain unethical activities in cell research. In order for the United
States to retain it cutting-edge scientific status, we must make a
national commitment to a robust research program.”

Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce

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